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Amplified Activism – Transmedia Storytelling and Social Change

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The avenues through which communities and community organisations raise awareness about the issues they face and how they agitate for change have developed rapidly in the past ten years; and digital technology has provided community activists with the means to quickly create and widely disseminate stories. Perhaps the most influential and wide reaching of recent innovations in storytelling has been transmedia storytelling. The term transmedia storytelling first came into prominence via Henry Jenkins, he used it to describe a particular approach to storytelling that made use of the emerging media platforms being utilised more frequently by everyday consumers. Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling, which remains the generally accepted definition – albeit oft revised and somewhat fluid – was first introduced in his Technology Review column in 2003 stating 'a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole' (<http://www.technologyreview.com/news/401760/transmedia-storytelling/>). The concept of transmedia storytelling, in turn, has increased the modes and styles through and in which stories are told.

The pervasive examples of transmedia storytelling that have emerged over the past ten years are big budget, mainstream film and television franchises that roll out their marketing campaigns disguised as story or narrative over a number of distinct media platforms. However, over the last three years other types of projects have become more commonplace. The types of projects discussed here utilise recognisable conventions of transmedia storytelling and borrow elements from other forms of storytelling that pre-date transmedia, such as digital storytelling and documentary film making. In addition to being hybrid in form these projects are independent and solely focussed on raising awareness about particular social issues or telling the stories of marginalized groups, who otherwise do not have a voice in the public sphere. These types of projects have re-worked and re-purposed some of the conventions of transmedia storytelling to suit their intentions, and have much in common with the notion of transmedia activism. Lina Srivastava has defined transmedia activism as 'creating social impact by using storytelling by a number of de-centralised authors who share assets, create content for distribution across multiple forms of media to raise awareness and influence action' (<http://www.namac.org/node/6925>).

Transmedia activism challenges a great deal of what we understand to be transmedia storytelling. Much of what has been identified as transmedia storytelling fetishises mainstream, franchise based stories (and even in the instances where fans have to an extent taken control of the story it is still always in the interest of the large corporations at the heart of the project) or what James Bridle calls 'sleek black box, corporate controlled objects, platforms or services' (<http://booktwo.org/notebook/new-aesthetic-politics/>). That is not, necessarily to dismiss or diminish these types of projects or the ways in which they are considered rather the aim is to open up the field to encompass other works that instead champion what Bridle describes as 'open source, hackable, comprehensible and sharable alternatives' (<http://booktwo.org/notebook/new-aesthetic-politics/>).

The kind of activism illustrated in projects such as *18 Days in Egypt*, *Highrise* and *The Hollow* are inclusive in their approach and focussed on illuminating hitherto unexamined aspects of an issue, particularly the experiences of the people involved to create alternative media representations and express alternative political possibilities. *18 Days in Egypt*, *Highrise* and *The Hollow* clearly show how potent storytelling can be in this space, and it is useful to explore the ways these kinds of projects re-define our understanding of transmedia as an evolving concept. *Highrise* is described as 'a multi-year and many-media collaborative documentary experiment funded by the National Film Board of Canada' (<http://highrise.nfb.ca>). The online project is comprised of two main components – *Out my Window* and *The One*

Millionth Tower, and the aim is to 'see how the documentary process can drive and participate in social innovation rather than just to document it' (<http://highrise.nfb.ca>).

The One Millionth Tower

(http://highrise.nfb.ca/onemillionthtower/1mt_no_webgl.php?alternate=fail&bandwidth=high)

was released in August 2012 and tells the story of one Canadian high rise in a 3 D immersive documentary powered entirely by HTML5, WebGL and other open source JavaScript libraries.

The residents of the crumbling tower block collaborated with a group of architects, animators and web developers to create the three dimensional documentary. *18 Days in Egypt*

(<http://beta.18daysinegypt.com/>) is a group storytelling project that encourages a dynamic and

dialogic method of storytelling via the use of many contemporary storytelling techniques such

as tweets, Facebook updates and mobile phone footage and uploading them to the purpose built

18 Days in Egypt site. Egyptians were encouraged to contribute any stories they had from Tahrir

Square and then invite family and friends to contribute to the story uploaded by adding their

own perspective on the events. *The Hollow* is a 'community participatory' project and

interactive documentary that explores the social and economic devastation of rural towns in

America through the story of McDowell County in West Virginia. It brings together personal

digital stories, photography, sounds, interactive data and grassroots mapping on an HTML5

website which was designed to 'discuss the many stereotypes associated with the area,

population loss and potential for the future' (<http://www.hollowthefilm.com/about/>). At the

centre of the project are around thirty stories made about and by the residents of McDowell

using video, stills, text and voiceover that are reminiscent of traditional digital stories. The

director of *The Hollow*, Elaine McMillion, states that when she arrived at McDowell County she

found 'really phenomenal stories of pride and hope' and realised that 'she wasn't comfortable

editing those into 75 minute form and putting a title slide saying "The End"

(<http://collabdocs.wordpress.com>). Similarly in *Highrise* the vision of the creators was to see

how 'the documentary process can drive and participate in social innovation rather than just to

document it; and to help re-invent what it means to be an urban species in the 21st century'

(<http://highrise.nfb.ca>) rather than to document and implicitly claiming objectivity while

simultaneously authoring the work on behalf of the participants. *18 Days in Egypt* is described

as a 'collaborative documentary' that aims to *capture* the days in Tahrir Square leading up to the

ousting of President Mubarak on the 11th February 2011. The use of the word capture rather

than to document or report is important; and suggests that unlike traditional documentary this

type of group storytelling offers a more authentic and representative picture of the Egyptian

revolution.

The kind of activism demonstrated in *18 days in Egypt*, *The Hollow* and *Highrise*

combines a fundamental belief in the dignity of the subjects and strives to convey the

complexities of the lives and issues by taking advantage of the technology available to challenge

audiences to enter experience and interact with the stories in new ways.